

George Dawson, Franz Boas and The Origins of Professional Anthropology in Canada

Gail Avrith-Wakeam

Volume 17, numéro 1-2, 1993

Dominions Apart: Reflections on the Culture of Science and Technology in Canada and Australia 1850-1945

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800368ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/800368ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Avrith-Wakeam, G. (1993). George Dawson, Franz Boas and The Origins of Professional Anthropology in Canada. *Scientia Canadensis*, 17(1-2), 185–203.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/800368ar>

George Dawson, Franz Boas and The Origins of Professional Anthropology in Canada

Gail Avrith-Wakeam

Introduction

During the late nineteenth century both Australians and Canadians entered a period of intense national preoccupation with colonization and subjugation of native populations. In Canada, as in Australia, native peoples were one of the greatest impediments to colonization. In the historical drama that played itself out between the races on these two continental frontiers, Social Darwinism and the theory of social evolution played a vital part in legitimating policies devoted to the extermination of native culture and peoples. The application of Darwinian theory to human history mandated that in social conflicts between strong and weak races, only the strong would survive. The popular meaning of this scientific dictum was clear: aboriginal people who vied with white Anglo-Saxon Protestants for political power and ownership of the land would necessarily lose out.

Darwinism served similar political and rhetorical ends in both Canada and Australia but it had special appeal to Canadian intellectuals for whom it provided a scientific basis for the post-Confederation nationalist belief that Canada's unique qualities derived from her northern location, her severe winters and the heritage of her northern races. The role of climate as a 'persistent source of natural selection' became the objective reason for Aryan hegemony on the continent.¹

Darwinism and the alchemy of science transformed nationalist optimism about Canada's future superiority from the vague realm of wishful thinking into a value-neutral technical idea, a lawful and natural outcome of the processes of nature.²

Darwinian evolution added a pessimistic outlook for the Indian's future and new dimensions to government administration of the Indian. If political participation for native people had been considered in the Reformist spirit of the 1830s, legislators in the newly federated provinces of the Canadian Dominion in the years after Darwin saw things very differently. Threatened by the idea of

- 1 Carl Berger, 'The True North Strong and Free,' in Peter Russel (ed.), *Nationalism in Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 9.
- 2 For the uses of anthropology by colonial administration, see Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

participatory democracy for the Indians, who outnumbered whites, and facing violent confrontation with them, the government turned to the science of ethnology as an inexpensive and expedient way of resolving the 'Indian Question' and the dilemma of what to do about the Indians without either physically annihilating them, as the Americans had done, or giving them political equality. Evolutionary theory and the view that the fate of the Indian on the North American continent was extinction provided a safe route through the horns of the dilemma and played an important part in shaping Canadian social attitudes towards the Indian as well as their political administration.

During the 1880s, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, acting as head of the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs, implemented a series of programs and policies designed to socially engineer the Indian's behaviour and foster the necessary preconditions to hasten their demise and their racial 'assimilation' into the lower classes of 'civilized' society.³

The application of scientific expertise to the resolution of the political conflict between the Indians and Whites sidestepped the very complicated social, ethical and political question of the Indian's civil rights and the equally difficult problems surrounding their legal entitlement to the land, questions which Canadians have only begun to address in the past few years.⁴

However, in Canada, unlike Australia, there was a competing scientific theory which impeded territorial dominion of the continent. While the government implemented policies to aid the Indian's evolutionary absorption into white society, it also sponsored the British Association's Committee to Investigate the North West Tribes of Canada and the research of Franz Boas. This research was important in promoting the idea that human destiny was a contingency of history and not an inevitable consequence of heredity and geography as Darwinian biology postulated and a national policy of conquest and colonization demanded. The aim of Boasian ethnology was to demonstrate that custom, belief and feeling were the unique result of individual upbringing and history.⁵

Unlike evolutionary anthropology, this view was subversive to nationalist ambitions because the political goal was to cultivate greater human tolerance and understanding. For Boasian anthropology, culture was a contingent by-

3 This entailed four separate programs: the first was dedicated to turning Indians into farmers; the second was the creation of industrial and residential schools run by the missionaries; the third was the suppression of native custom and the enactment of anti-Potlatch legislation; the fourth was banning the sale of liquor.

4 The role of scientists in political disputes has been discussed at length by Dorothy Nelkin. See especially 'The Political Impact of Technical Expertise,' *Social Studies of Science*, 5 (1975), 35-54. For the impact of expertise in social and political conflict, see also Allan Mazur, 'Disputes between Experts,' *Minerva*, 11 (1973), 243-62.

5 Franz Boas, 'The Aims of Ethnology' (1889) in G.W. Stocking, Jr. (ed.), *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911: A Franz Boas Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 71.

product of history, not the immutable influence of race. This view of ethnology did not support an administrative policy dedicated to eliminating the Indian and his culture.

From the nineteenth to the early twentieth century, all professional anthropological work in Canada was funded by government, and political interests played a vital role in shaping the intellectual content as well as the institutional organization and professional style of research. This essay illustrates the influence of institutional contexts and national styles upon the development of science, by examining the institutional connections between ethnology and government in Canada during the 1880s, in ways which curbed cultural relativism and conditioned the rejection of Boas' vision of professional research. That vision was based on the model of the German university and the research ideal of *wissenschaft*, which could represent practical, applied research outside the university as amateur or dilettante.⁶

It was a vision that was alien to many scientists who worked in contexts, including Australia and Canada, where the practical aims of research were paramount.

This essay focuses on George Dawson's association and conflicts with Franz Boas on the British Association's Committee to Investigate the North West Tribes of Canada. It seeks to understand how the institutional and professional identification of Canadian ethnology with a government agency — the Geological Survey of Canada — contributed to the triumph of the comparative method, and to professional goals defined by the interests of government and public instruction rather than by the aims of pure research. Institutional culture not only determines intellectual style, but also conditions professionalism.

1. National Style in Canada: Science as Inventory and the 'Indian Question'

The Geological Survey of Canada was the country's first and most important scientific institution. In 1842, the Canadian government created the Survey and hired William Logan, whose training amongst Britain's leading geologists and whose dedication to patient observation and collection of geological facts made him an apt candidate to advance the mining economy of the province.⁷

In 1877, the Survey Act made staff of the Survey employees of the federal Department of the Interior. The act also made it the duty of the Survey to study and report on the fauna and flora of the Dominion, and to collect the necessary

6 John Theodore Merz, *A History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Dover, 1965), 167.

7 Morris Zaslow, *Reading the Rocks: The Story of the Geological Survey of Canada, 1842-1972* (Ottawa: Macmillan, 1975).

materials for a Canadian museum of natural history, mineralogy and geology. This widened scope of the Survey's interests and operations encouraged its field officers to explore a range of field sciences and to extend their collecting activities to all branches of natural history. The *Annual Reports* of the Survey became storehouses of information on geology, mineral resources, topography, climate, zoology, palaeontology, biology, and ethnology of the country and the geology museum began to fill to overflowing with artefacts, fossils and specimens representing Canada's natural history.⁸

The Survey's institutional focus on collection and description gave rise to the practice of 'science as inventory.'⁹ This scientific style, so intimately connected with science in the Geological Survey of Canada, was not unique to Canada. It was a style pioneered in the geodetic work done by Edward Sabine for the British Association, and familiar to many in the world of Europe overseas, who read Humbolt and internalized his creed of accurate collection, description and the measured study of widespread but interconnected real phenomena. It was a style common to many forms of government research in North America, including the Wilkes expedition, the state geological surveys, and the U.S. Coast Survey.¹⁰

It had its counterpart in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. But given the absence of alternative scientific institutions and patrons in Canada, the Geological Survey became the most important scientific institution in the country, with practical aims and goals which ultimately determined the nature and scope of Canadian professional science.

2. George Dawson: Natural History and National Destiny

The need to know what economic promise the West held for potential settlement played an important part in the intellectual expansion of the Survey's operations. The Survey's director, Alfred Selwyn, gave broad instructions to field geologists to collect natural history specimens when this did not interfere with exploration. These instructions may have come as a burden to some geologists in the Survey, but not to George Dawson, a follower of T.H. Huxley and a keen advocate of anthropology.¹¹

8 Zaslow, *ibid.*; W.H. Collins, *The National Museum of Canada* (Ottawa: reprinted from the *Annual Report for 1926, National Museum of Canada*, F.A. Acland, 1928).

9 Carl Berger, *Science, God and Nature in Victorian Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

10 Susan Faye Cannon, *Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period* (Washington, DC: Dawson, 1978).

11 See Kuklick, *op. cit.* note 2.

George Dawson was the son of John William Dawson, Principal of McGill College and outspoken critic of evolutionary theory.¹²

He was educated partly by his father and partly at McGill College, before leaving for the Royal School of Mines in London in 1869. There, Dawson devoted special attention to geology and palaeontology, chemistry and metallurgy. Becoming a natural historian and geologist, Dawson was inspired by the research ideal that Darwin embodied and Huxley extolled at the Royal School of Mines. It was a ideal developed by the amateur clubs and associations of the newly rich of the provincial industrial towns, who looked on natural knowledge and polite learning as part of the practical pursuit and moral development of gentlemen.¹³

The pursuit of natural history required patience, dedication and discipline to arrive at the 'truth,' and these moral qualities differentiated amateurs from professionals. If Darwin's work surpassed that of Alfred Russell Wallace, it was not in the theory but in the textured detail of his empirical evidence. The 'truth' of Darwin's work lay in his factual descriptions. Moreover, natural history was inspired by the potential practical application of knowledge to economic, political and social problems.¹⁴

Such were the ideals that Dawson brought from England to Canada, ideals animated his anthropological research on the Indians, and that ultimately sowed the seeds of conflict with Franz Boas.

Dawson returned to Canada in 1873, believing that he had an important part to play in collecting the evidence for the Darwinian debate and wanting to put his scientific training to practical use in the development of the country. In the *Origin of Species* (1859) Charles Darwin had written that embryology, palaeontology and comparative anatomy were the three sciences that would provide the empirical evidence necessary to pass decisive judgement on the scientific underpinning's of his theory. In the *Descent of Man* (1871) Darwin showed that evolutionary theory could provide useful tools for a scientific study of man as a biological and a cultural phenomenon. Dawson was qualified by his training in palaeontology and his appointment with the Canadian Survey to make the systematic collections required to evaluate the logical consistency

12 Dawson was cautious to refrain from openly expressing his Darwinian beliefs out of respect for his father who staunchly opposed Darwinism. Consideration of his father's beliefs made it necessary for Dawson to 'live behind entrenchments and in fortifications fancied by myself ... finding expression chiefly ... in written words, guardedly, and hazarding nothing in open speech.' George Mercer Dawson, 'George and His Father -Pathetic,' George Dawson Papers, McGill University, Montreal.

13 Arnold Thackray, 'Natural Knowledge in Cultural Context: The Manchester Model,' *American Historical Review*, 79 (1974), 672-709.

14 T.H. Huxley, 'On Natural History, as Knowledge, Discipline, and Power,' *The Scientific Memoirs*, 1, 305-314.

and consonance of evolutionary theory with the facts — facts which he was uniquely disposed to collect through his explorations and work for the Canadian Survey.

Dawson's appointment as natural historian and botanist to the International Boundary Commission was an important outlet for his Darwinian approach. The Commission was set up to collaborate with a similar body from the U.S. to survey and mark the 49th parallel from the Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains.¹⁵

The British Commission was responsible for collecting information on the resources of the region of the 49th parallel and on means to make it productive. Dawson's inventory of minerals, soils, potential building and water supplies, as well as of animal and vegetable products, was guided by the belief that the biological history of a region held important clues for determining its future potential.

The Indians' adaptation to the environment, their native knowledge of the waterways and its plants and animals were the most important factors in shaping Dawson's belief in the potential for civilization in the West. Dawson's report lent scientific confirmation to the hopeful prospects of Canadian national progress. His views revolutionized the vision of the West's rich potential for farming and settlement and this won him appointment with the Survey in 1875. Dawson's first assignment with the Survey was in British Columbia, where he added an anthropology of the Queen Charlotte Islands to his geological work.¹⁶

In the Queen Charlotte Islands, Dawson discovered the Haida, and was struck by the artistry and skill of their totem poles. The beauty and complexity of their architecture, as well as the Haida's skill in constructing their homes and villages, convinced Dawson that he had discovered a higher type of Indian civilization in Canada — one that, had it not been for the intrusions of the Europeans, might have equalled the Aztec or Incan civilizations. For Dawson, the cultural attainments of the Haida confirmed them as a race more highly civilized than others on the coast.¹⁷

- 15 A.R. Turner, 'Surveying the International Boundary: The Journal of George M. Dawson, 1873,' *Saskatchewan History*, 21 (1968) 1-23; John E. Parson, *West of the 49th Parallel: Red River to the Rockies 1872-6* (New York: William Morrow, 1963).
- 16 John Van West, 'George Mercer Dawson: Father of Canadian Anthropology' (unpublished paper); 'George Mercer Dawson: An Early Canadian Anthropologist,' *Anthropological Journal of Canada*, 14 (1976) 8-12.
- 17 See G. Dawson, 'On the Haida Indians of the Queen Charlotte Islands' Appendix A to the Report of the Queen Charlotte Islands, *Report of Progress*, Geological Survey of Canada, 1878-79, Montreal. See also, G. Dawson, 'The Haida's,' *Harpers Magazine*, 45 (1882), 401-8.

Race and culture being two sides of the coin of heredity, it was natural for Dawson to perceive the Haida as having whiter skin, with 'finer features' and a 'prepossessing appearance,' by European standards. Dawson believed that the physiognomy of the Haida showed evidence of intelligence and quickness,¹⁸ and composed a study of the Haida that marks a high point in his writing on Indians. It drew the attention of the scientific world to the ethnological riches of the Canadian North Pacific coast. His *Report* for the Survey drew anthropological attention quarter and his article for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* drew popular attention to his discoveries — discoveries that not only had important reverberations for research on the Indians of the North West Coast but for the future of Dawson's career and Canadian anthropology.

As a geologist for the Survey, Dawson had neither the funds nor the time to pursue more theoretically-oriented questions that engaged his imagination in the Queen Charlotte Islands, such as whether Indians had originated in the Asia, and had crossed the Behring Strait.¹⁹

This question was not investigated until twenty years later when the Jesup Expedition under Boas' direction took up the problem. However, if Dawson's research could not proceed in theoretical directions, his anthropological research did help shape policy towards the Indians. The Indians were the biggest impediment to white settlement in the Canadian West. They were resentful of intrusions into their territories and appropriations of their land. In 1879, applying his knowledge of the natural history of the Indians, Dawson published a 'Sketch of the Past and Present Condition of the Indians of Canada' in the *Canadian Naturalist*. Dawson drew upon statistics — a Darwinian index of their biological success — to suggest that Indians were diminishing, especially in those areas of close competition with white populations. With Indians diminishing naturally, Dawson saw no need to engage in open warfare. Natural history dictated the fate of the Indian as 'absorption and extinction': just as European wild plants accidentally imported succeeded in dominating North American pastures, so, too, European civilization would cause the Indian race to melt away.²⁰

Dawson believed in the right of Europeans to displace Indians — a 'natural' right allegedly founded on the theory of evolution — and took an active interest in applying evolutionary theory to the natural history of the area.

18 See especially Dawson's appendix to the 1878-9 appendix to the Geological Survey's *Report of Progress*, 'On the Haida Indians of the Queen Charlotte Islands.'

19 In his article on the Haida Dawson wrote: 'It is therefore more than probable that people with their rude arts may from time to time have been borne to the western coast of America, and that it is to Eastern Asia that we must look for the origin of its inhabitants.' *Harper's Magazine*, 45 (1882), 408.

20 G. Dawson, 'Sketch of the Past and Present Condition of the Indians of Canada,' *Canadian Naturalist*, 9 (1879), 32-39.

Dawson focussed on Indian history and geographical distribution because their concept of ownership was important to the negotiation of treaties. In addition, Dawson's ethnological investigation of the Haida, Kwakiutl and the Shuswap revealed that Indians of the Coast were occupied in fishing, stock-raising and farming — pursuits which harmonized with plans for industrial development in the West. He advised the government to encourage these forms of work and to resist segregating the Indians onto reserves which would hinder their assimilation into Canadian society. Dawson, like the Minister of the Interior, believed that in the best interests of the Indians and the state alike every effort should be made to prepare the Indians for their evolutionary part in Canada's historical destiny and in 'building up the future greatness of the Dominion' by extinguishing native culture and custom.²¹

If the government of British Columbia had 'transgressed the limits of strict justice' towards Indians in refusing to acknowledge their legal title to land, this action had served the interests of Indians by furthering their progress towards civilization, a policy he advised the federal government to continue. The ultimate object of all Indian legislation was the necessary protection and encouragement during the dangerous period of first contact with whites, to raise the native eventually to the position of a citizen requiring neither special laws of restraint or favour.²²

The scientific prediction that the Indian would become extinct not only informed Dawson's advice for government administrative policy, but also galvanized Dawson's desire to build a museum. The rapid decline of the Haida villages strengthened Dawson's interest in ethnology and his resolve to preserve a record of their past. He dedicated a series of photographs to their totem poles, which he later sketched and added to his report. He collected objects connected with traditional culture, which later contributed to the national museum. In Dawson's view, the artefacts of the Haida as well as other Canadian Indians had relevance nationally because they were part of the Canadian racial heritage. His efforts to establish a national ethnological museum devoted to bringing anthropology within the framework of government gave a distinctly practical and nationalist cast to the intellectual aims and interests of Canadian anthropologists.

3. National Style in Germany: *Wissenschaft* and Problem-Oriented Research

At almost the same time that George Dawson was pursuing his scientific work in British Columbia, a young German trained PhD named Franz Boas was among the Eskimo of Baffin Land carrying on geographic and ethnographic

21 *Ibid.*, 31.

22 *Ibid.*, 29, 30.

research. Unlike Dawson, whose scientific training was geared to the practical needs of geology and mining and whose professional life was dictated by the practical interests of Parliament and Survey, Franz Boas was educated in a German university, in a system dedicated to criticism and the generation of new knowledge.²³

This system generated loyalties to specialized fields of knowledge and exhaustive study. Boas' field research in the Arctic was typical of this perspective. His aim was to study the extent of environmental influences on human behaviour.²⁴ He therefore felt it necessary to study a people living in a fairly uniform physical environment.²⁵

Life among the Eskimo had a profound effect upon Boas, who made use of the Eskimo's complex understanding of their geography contained within their myths and legends to revamp the configuration of the Cumberland Sound.²⁶

Boas returned to Germany convinced that tradition and culture conditioned human psychology, and that physical reality was a product of the human imagination. His vocation was to establish the truth of this idea. An 'exhibit' of some Bella Coola Indians in Berlin in 1885 encouraged him to study their language. This preliminary work whetted his appetite to do fieldwork on the North West Coast of Canada. He began to rack his brains to find a way to establish contact with Canada.²⁷

4. Boas' Canadian Odyssey

In 1886, Boas wrote to George Dawson, proposing carrying on ethnographic research for the Geological Survey of Canada. Boas had encountered Dawson's ethnographic work on the Haida through his *Comparative Vocabularies of the*

- 23 See Joseph Ben-David, *The Scientists' Role in Society* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1971); Theodore Mertz, *A History of European Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol.1 (New York: Dover, 1965); Walter Goldschmidt, *Portraits from Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1956); E. Shils, 'On the Order of Learning in the United States,' in A. Oleson and J. Voss (eds), *The Organization of Knowledge in America, 1869-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 19-47.
- 24 F. Boas, 'The Background of my Early Thinking,' in Stocking (ed.), *op. cit.* note 5, 41 and 'Psychic Life From a Mechanistic Viewpoint,' in Stocking (ed.), *op. cit.* note 5.
- 25 George Stocking, Jr., 'The Basic Assumptions of Boasian Anthropology,' *The Shaping of American Anthropology 1883-1911: A Franz Boas Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).
- 26 F. Boas, 'A Year Among the Eskimo,' *Journal of the American Geographical Society*, 19 (1887), 386.
- 27 F. Boas to Krakowitzer, 5 February 1885, quoted in Helen Yampolsky, 'Excerpts from the Letter Diary of F. Boas on his first Field Trip to the North West Coast,' *International Journal of American Linguistics* 24 (1958), 313.

Indian Tribes of British Columbia. Their mutual interest in the ethnology of British Columbia, coupled with Dawson's privileged appointment as assistant director of the Survey, made him a promising ally in Boas' struggle to establish himself in Canada. Boas offered the results of his research and suggestions to improve Dawson's Indian vocabularies, on the assumption that criticism was an essential ingredient in the generation of new knowledge. Dawson was thankful for Boas' remarks, but offered no more. He was satisfied that errors occurred in all such vocabularies and could not be avoided unless a special study of each language was undertaken.²⁸

He felt that the difficulties and expense of undertaking special studies of individual languages was a practical impossibility for the Survey. The need for practical outcomes made it impossible to consider funding his research and 'availing ourselves of your offered services.'²⁹

Boas, rebuffed by Dawson, turned to another assistant director at the Geological Survey, Robert Bell, inquiring about the possibilities of joining a research expedition through the Hudson Bay. Bell referred Boas to the Department of Marine and the Deputy Minister of that Department, reminding him to spell out the benefits that would accrue to Canada's national reputation as a result of funding Boas' research. He emphasised how difficult it was to manipulate government institutions for the purposes of independent private research, and that it would be impossible to arrange anything definite with Canadian politicians. Prospects for innovative theoretical research were dim, and the Survey's resources were diminished by its contribution to the Indian and Colonial Exhibition. Even had they had the money, the absence of the Director who was attending the Exhibition would make it impossible to make any final decision.

Bell warned Boas that it was a particularly bad time of year to settle any question of what could be done because Parliament was in session and Canadian politicians were not sufficiently interested in science to do any thing purely for the sake of science. Bell had little hope of getting them to consider questions so far from their immediate political interests. The newly established Royal Society of Canada had no funds. The government paid for the printing of the Society's *Transactions*. Bell suggested that Boas approach an American institution and look to Canada for aid later, once his research had proved to be of international value and therefore likely to enhance Canada's prestige.³⁰

Boas was not only refused funds from the Canadians; he was also denied funds from Berlin's Ethnographic Aid Committee. Left to his own devices, Boas raised the money for fieldwork in British Columbia from family and friends. He studied the collections of North West Coast artefacts from the Volkerkunde

28 American Philosophical Society, Dawson to Boas, 23 February 1886.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Boas Correspondence, Robert Bell to Boas, 15 May 1886.

Museum with the explicit intention of collecting artefacts on the North West Coast and selling these artefacts to museums to finance his work on belief and custom. Boas was particularly interested in collecting for the Geological Survey's museum, which seemed the most promising and interested client for these objects. Before leaving for British Columbia in the summer of 1886, Boas stopped in London to consult with Dr. Alfred Selwyn, the director of the Survey. Selwyn mentioned that the Survey was working through the Royal Society to form a National Museum that would have an ethnological collection attached to it. He suggested that Boas write once again to George Dawson who was the moving spirit behind the Survey's ethnological collections.

George Dawson was deeply involved in the effort to improve the Geological Survey's collections of ethnology and establish a museum. He was anxious to secure and preserve all that he could on the 'prehistoric races of the Dominion' and regretted that so little had been done and that Canadian collections were limited to three small museums, one at the Geological Survey's Museum, another at the Peter Redpath Museum and a third at Laval University.³¹

Dawson was the inspiration behind the Royal Society's efforts to add to the Geological Survey's collections and establish a National Museum of Natural History and Ethnology. The collection of specimens and facts bearing on the native tribes of Canada was especially important when it was still possible to obtain them. In only a few years, these would be 'lost beyond recall.' Under his aegis, the Royal Society of Canada sent a circular of inquiry soliciting specimens and artefacts from Hudson's Bay officials. Dawson wanted to establish a museum, and 'to secure the services of active and energetic scientific curators fitted to give real value to the specimens which may be collected.'³²

He was looking for a professional who shared his vision of making science serve practical and national interests. In marked contrast to his earlier rejection of Boas' proposal, Dawson welcomed Boas' offer. Dawson was enthusiastic about getting a trained investigator like Boas to work for the Survey — although he was still unable to get him funds.³³

Dawson's collaboration with Boas was fraught with ambivalence. Dawson regretted he could not do a more complete study of the Haida, with whom he found it easy to be on terms of intimacy, and from whom he thought he could obtain 'without reserve' everything they knew in a few months time.³⁴

31 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 28 July 1886.

32 G. Dawson, *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 1883, ciii.

33 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 16 August 1886.

34 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 28 November 1886.

However, Indian ethnology required time in the field than Dawson could spare. The task of salvaging Indian history would have to be a collaborative effort. And it was clear that he did not like sharing Canadian ethnology with this highly qualified outsider. The Committee to Investigate the North West Tribes of the Dominion was established by the British Association at its first imperial meeting in Montreal in 1884. The committee was chaired by the internationally renowned British anthropologist, E.B. Tylor, and supervised locally by Daniel Wilson (President of the University of Toronto), Horatio Hale (a retired American lawyer who had served as ethnologist for the U.S. Wilkes Expedition), and the young Dawson. In 1888, the committee hired Franz Boas to do fieldwork in British Columbia.

Canadian interest in the committee, represented by Dawson, was to use the organization to collect ethnological material and generate enthusiasm for a museum. The British Association voted £150 in the hope that the Canadian Government would follow their lead. Dawson viewed this as a reasonable request as long as it was understood that 'any collections made would be the property of the government.'³⁵

The object of the Survey was to create a Canadian Bureau of Ethnology, and to continue the kind of work that John Wesley Powell had been doing at the Bureau of American Ethnology — namely, identifying and linguistically mapping North American Indians. From Boas' point of view, the committee created an opportunity for him to revisit B.C. and continue his own research.³⁶

He wanted to use the journey to do intensive fieldwork on the Salish. But intensive study was not what Horatio Hale, who was editor of the committee's reports, had in mind. Hale's instructions to Boas were to obtain as 'complete an account as possible' of the coast tribes and their languages. For Boas 'complete' meant individual tribal studies that were exhaustive in their detail. Hale's expectation of a 'complete' study was not so much a minute and special study of any one or two stocks or tribes, for which he felt there was not enough time, but a general outline or synopsis 'of the ethnology of the whole Province.'³⁷

Dawson supported Boas' desire to do comprehensive studies of particular groups and to increase the time he spent in the field. Dawson shared Boas' suspicion of the 'pursuit of generalization' and hypothesis, because he felt that

35 Unsigned letter to H. Hale 22, November 1888 in Boas' handwriting on back of one of his letters.

36 F. Boas' view that the Committee's purpose was to serve his private research interests is expressed in a letter to John Wesley Powell, then acting director of the Bureau of American Ethnology, explaining that he had been hired to 'continue my researches,' Boas to J.W. Powell, 12 June 1887, quoted in Stocking, *op. cit.* .59.

37 Boas Correspondence, H. Hale to Boas 30 April 1888.

general ideas were certain to be modified or revised. Ethnological methods were changing and what was unimportant now might prove important in the future.³⁸

He was glad to have Boas spend a whole summer living with one group and he believed that more 'persuasively useful work can be done by a systematic attack of that kind than by skirmishing.'³⁹ Although Hale would decide on the precise field of work, Dawson felt a detailed study of some tribe or tribes was what now possessed 'most value.'⁴⁰

Dawson was an advocate of intensive work because it enabled him to focus the committee's funds and Boas's attention on collecting antiquities in stone, bone and wood, illustrating the arts and manufactures of 'our Indians' for the Museum he confidently looked forward to having built 'in the not far distant future.'⁴¹

He hoped to purchase a large collection of crania and skeletons, as these would 'impress a special character and value on any Museum containing it,' for crania were important in defining racial typologies.⁴²

A general survey of stocks necessarily included tribes on both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border. Dawson hoped that Boas would be able to arrange with Hale to spend most of the summer working on one detailed nationality or group of tribes, perhaps the Tsimshian or Aht people. These tribes possessed greatest interest to Dawson because they were almost entirely 'confined to Canadian territory and from that point of view as well as from the incompleteness of our knowledge respecting them, seem to invite attention.'⁴³

Though there was complete intellectual agreement between Dawson and Boas about the necessity of doing intensive field work, the professional reasons they adopted this approach were very different. Boas' desire to do intensive field studies grew out of his dedication to the idea that history was the basis of all the observed similarities and differences between people. Dawson's interest in intensive ethnographic study was nationalistic, and based instead on the belief that racial or national history was the basis for all observed similarities and differences.

Hale's directions were so markedly different from Boas' that, when Boas received his final instructions, he felt he was sitting between two chairs. He

38 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 4 December 1888.

39 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 8 June 1888.

40 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 14 July 1889.

41 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 27 April 1889.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Hale, 11 May 1889.

had one letter from Dawson who wanted him to visit the West coast, while Hale wanted him to visit the West coast and also the Kwakiutl and the Salish. The wide territorial distribution of these groups made Boas feel that this was 'really crazy.'⁴⁴

Boas was attracted to the Canadian North West where, unlike the Arctic, human history had played a important role. Among the Indians of British Columbia, he had studied the correlation and distribution of complex cultural phenomena amongst a large number of peoples in a geographically delimited area, and gathered data to confirm his belief in the origin of culture by diffusion rather than independent invention. Boas used myth to identify tribes rather than language.

Dawson, however, 'was suspicious of mythology as a test of racial identity.' His own work had shown that tribes shared stories and arts when their languages were distinct and even when their relations were hostile: if they could not speak the same language and if their social relations were hostile it was unlikely that they could be described as racially interbreeding. He had heard of tribes as far apart as Alberta, Northern British Columbia and Victoria who shared similar tales, tribes which were too far apart geographically to have come into physical contact with one another and share hereditary descent.⁴⁵

Boas' map grouped people together on the basis of similarities in traditions or myths, rather than on the basis of language or hereditary descent. Dawson objected to this ethnological mapping, because it was based on attributes which were not possible to prove, and, more importantly, because it conflicted with his belief that what separated people was an inherent product of biology. Boas believed that the differences and similarities between people were a product of their ideas. For Dawson, the motive force of evolutionary history was geography and heredity, not tradition; what separated or joined breeding groups or races was their physical location and their environment.

According to Dawson, it was the ethnologist's first task to establish all the 'well marked differences and to distinguish by name and line where these are in excess of resemblances.'⁴⁶

Dawson objected to Boas' use of myth to group tribes or races because this meant that ideas and beliefs were more important in shaping the course of history than the common circumstances of heredity and geography. For Dawson geography was destiny. Dawson used his influence as an editor of the Royal Society's ethnological publications to keep Boas' critique of the evolutionary

44 F. Boas to Marie Boas 19 July 1889, family letters 1889, quoted in R. Rohner (ed.), *The Ethnography of Franz Boas*, 106.

45 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 20 August 1886.

46 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 19 March 1888.

method and its equation of race and culture out of Canada. In 1887 Dawson had accepted a descriptive paper on the Kwakiutl without hesitation, stating that: 'Such an abstract ... would ... I have no doubt prove very acceptable at the Royal Society meeting next month.'⁴⁷

However, in 1889, when Boas sent in a paper on the mythology of British Columbia for publication in the Society's *Transactions*, Dawson agreed to forward his views, but made it clear that 'it is impossible for me to speak definitely as to the intention of the Royal Society of Canada in the matter as I am not even a member of the particular section under which they would come.'⁴⁸

Dawson also prevented Boas from obtaining professional appointment in Canada. Boas' position with *Science* ended in 1889, and he wanted to devote himself full time to ethnology. The Ethnological Committee had expectations of about \$1,000 yearly available for research. The committee's grants were numerous but small, being designed to encourage the Canadian government to assume its initiative. Both Hale and Dawson were aware that Boas was looking for a permanent position in ethnology and that the committee's funds were inadequate. Hale hoped that Boas would eventually become permanently attached: 'to one of the scientific departments either of Canada or of the United States: and I fancy this will be the final upshot. I shall gladly do whatever I can in either direction.'⁴⁹

Boas went into the field in 1889 sceptical of Hale's assurances that Dawson would agree to the secretary of the Indian Department's suggestion that he avail himself of Boas's ethnological services.⁵⁰

In spite of Hale's reassurances that Dawson would get him 'permanent position under the Government for ethnological purposes' and Daniel Wilson's wish that 'it was possible to secure the services of the Doctor in our Canadian field of research,' Boas' prediction that nothing would come of it were well founded.⁵¹

Boas never obtained the promised position in Canada. The reasons for this lay in Dawson's objections against Boas' view of culture, and an animosity towards someone who was working on similar data with different theoretical objectives and interests; interests that furthermore conflicted with Canadian national ambitions. In later years, Dawson wrote of his relationship with Boas:

47 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 9 April 1887.

48 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 10 January 1889.

49 Boas Correspondence, Hale to Boas, 22 January 1889.

50 F. Boas, 19 July 1889, Family Letters (1889), quoted in R. Rohner (ed.), *op. cit.* 106.

51 *Ibid.*, Boas, 12 July 1889, Daniel Wilson to Horatio Hale, 7 October 1891.

... he was one of the members of our Committee. He was employed by the old NWT of Canada committee that was started in 1884 and was run by Sir D. Wilson then by H.Hale and lastly myself. Boas was at first very satisfactory and gave use some good reports, but since established connections with German and U.S. museums till eventually we feared even merely being used by him. I was very glad at last when the work of that Committee was closed and hope not to maintain closer relations with Dr. Boas than those of ordinary agreeableness. He is ... very furtive and altogether lacking in what I may call 'scientific ethics.'⁵²

In the face of Canadian rejection after 1889, Boas turned elsewhere for support. His fieldwork had yielded important results which he wanted to pursue. He had found that language was not an invariant determinant of race, because tribes who spoke the same language often differed greatly. His work on language pointed to the diffusion of North American Indian culture from Asia, and encouraged him to seek help from John Wesley Powell of the Bureau of American Ethnology to continue work on the Salishan linguistic family.⁵³

Powell did not want to commit the Bureau to a thorough study of the languages and dialects of the Salishan family, but he was willing to provide Boas with \$450.00 for research with the results of the work to be put at the disposal of the Bureau.

Boas' arrangements with Powell and the Bureau of American Ethnology, and his practice of financing his research through the sale of collections to overseas museums, greatly offended Dawson's nationalist sensibilities. It was at Dawson's insistence that Dr. Selwyn, director of the Geological Survey, authorized Boas to spend a sum of \$300 in 'preserving ethnological objects for our Museum here.'⁵⁴ He believed that collections had meaning to the evolutionary history of Canada and would be more highly appreciated there than they could be elsewhere.⁵⁵

However, Dawson denied that Canadians had the right to dictate in any way what Boas should do with the collections he had made, particularly because they had been able to offer him so little for undertaking the collections which he made; but this was not how he truly felt about the issue. Indeed, he felt strongly that Boas was duty-bound to keep collections of material from leaving the country, because these, rather than any theoretical innovation, would establish the foundations of Canadian ethnology. The imminent extinction of the Indian made it urgent to do ethnology while it was still possible to obtain facts and specimens. The extinction of the Indian, inevitable though it was thought to be, was a loss to science. Viewing Indians as the lineal descendants

52 G. Dawson to D.P. Penhallow, 8 January 1900, marked 'Personal,' R.G.45 V.102,#90, Boas Correspondence, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

53 Boas Correspondence, Boas to J.W. Powell, November 1888.

54 Boas Correspondence, Hale to Dawson, 8 June 1889.

55 Boas Correspondence, Dawson to Boas, 4 December 1888.

of prehistoric men, meant the disappearance of a living laboratory for students of human history. The need to salvage the remains of the disappearing Indian took on a moral dimension. This idea contributed to Dawson's belief that Canadian ethnological collections would be a source of great importance to the country's future scientific development.

The ethnological tradition that had come to Canada from Britain with Dawson was carried on the coat-tails of geology and was intellectually driven by the practical needs of its government patrons, and not by the pursuit of theoretical problems. Dawson believed that Boas was morally bound to serve the public interests of Canadians and the whole enterprise of professional ethnology as Dawson saw it had deep resonance with Canadian nationalism. Boas was trained to see things differently. He was a research scientist, a trained PhD, whose first loyalty was to science. The artefact collections he made on his first trip to British Columbia were consciously planned before he left Europe as a means of financing his research. He had no sense of moral or national obligation to make these collections available only to Canadians as Dawson secretly demanded. He explained to Dawson that when he went to British Columbia in 1886, he had severed his connection with the Berlin Museum. He made the trip at his own expense and later sold the collection to the Berlin Museum when made a favourable offer. Before he left for the field in 1888, the American Museum of Natural History suggested collecting for them, and Hale had given his permission in the belief that if the Canadians could not afford to purchase them then it was better that they be 'preserved in scientific museums somewhere then that they should be carried off by curiosity-hunting tourists and so (probably) lost to science altogether.'⁵⁶

With regard to his collections for the American Museum, Boas wrote:

I believe from a scientific point of view there can be no objection to it, as the collection here is by far the best on our continent, excelling that of the Smithsonian Institution as well as that in Ottawa. The only collection that is comparable to it is that in Berlin. It seems to my mind, that science is but served by making collections of certain regions as complete as possible.⁵⁷

Boas evidently did not think Dawson would understand his opinion, because he crossed them out of the letter.⁵⁸

56 Boas Correspondence, Hale to Dawson, 26 November 1888.

57 Boas Correspondence, Boas to Dawson, Draft, 28 November 1889.

58 Boas and Dawson were working on a similar effort to elaborate the history of the Haida and Dawson wrote to find out if Boas planned to publish the results. Boas was 'irritated' by Dawson's letter. What bothered him was the jealous implication that Boas was hoarding the information. In his diary he explained: 'We are not used to treating such things as a business matter in Germany, and I wrote him in a friendly manner ... it went against my grain.' F. Boas, 9 December 1886, *Letter Diary to Parents* (1886), quoted in Rohner, 72.

Conclusion

The collaboration between Dawson and Boas began with similar beliefs about the inevitability of Indian extinction and the urgent need for immediate ethnological salvage. They were in basic agreement about the aims of research and the need for collecting large masses of data to define culture areas and were equally suspicious of theory and generalization in the matter of evolution. However, the source of their views on these issues was different. Boas' opposition to evolutionary generalization grew out of an intellectual tradition in German thought that separated *Naturwissenschaften* from *Geisteswissenschaften*, sciences dealing with physical nature from sciences dealing with human spiritual activity. Boas had trained in an intellectual environment that opposed the reduction of human behaviour to physical or biological causality and actively sought to disassociate anthropology from evolutionary ideas.⁵⁹

Dawson opposed evolutionary generalization because generalization without all the facts was premature. Dawson's views originated in the Survey, an institutional context dedicated to factually detailed description and collection and to making ethnology subject to the methods and ideas of the physical sciences, especially geology. Dawson's resistance to the speculative theorizing of evolution was clearly a forceful attempt from the periphery to resist the powerful vortex of Washington anthropology and intellectual dominance of John Wesley Powell and the Bureau of American Ethnology — an intellectual dominance that was expressed in Powell's ready generalizations about the evolutionary development of native peoples. Dawson gave his support to Franz Boas and hired him for the BAAS Survey in 1888, a year after the young German emigre had courageously launched a frontal assault in *Science* on the prevailing evolutionary assumptions of American anthropology, confronting the most powerful figures in Washington anthropology — Otis T. Mason, curator of ethnology of the United States National Museum and John Wesley Powell of Washington's Bureau of American Ethnology.⁶⁰

Dawson's nationalist sympathies and his desire that Boas work exclusively in Canada harmonized well with the methods and aims of Boasian anthropology and the elaboration of culture as a holistic, integrated and historically conditioned framework. Dawson's resistance to the centre was an important stimulus and encouragement to Boas' pioneering work in British Columbia.⁶¹

59 Stocking, 'The Basic Assumptions of Boasian Anthropology,' in Stocking, *op. cit.* 11.

60 John Wesley Powell, however, was such a powerful and influential figure that when he entered the fray 'Boas rather quickly withdrew.' *Ibid.*, 57.

61 George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1897), 287.

But historical ethnology also gave rise to a liberal and pluralist view of culture. And Canadians like Dawson could not accept a theory that undermined the ideal that it was the biological destiny of the white races to supplant the red races in the West and the nationalist ideal that the white races were destined to rule by virtue of their racial superiority.

The failure of Canadians to attach themselves to the idea of cultural relativism and to its discoverer, Franz Boas, is striking because many of the discoveries that led to the development of this paradigm were made on the basis of empirical evidence drawn from Canada and with the aid of Canadian funds and workers. As Canadians moved into the vast uncharted regions of the North West and revealed the rich and impressive cultural heritage of the Indians the attention of the international community focused on Canada. Canada played host to the British Associations' Committee to Investigate the Tribes of the North West Coast between 1884 and 1897 and funded much of the Committee's work. George Dawson was responsible for directing Franz Boas' research confirming the primacy of culture over race and language and effecting the transformation of anthropology from a science theoretically devoted to evolution to one reformulated on the philosophical principles of relativity. Though Dawson contributed to the development of these ideas, there were limits set by the institutional context of government ethnology beyond which those like Dawson could not go in their appreciation of 'savage' ideas, beliefs and customs because Canadian anthropology was intellectually and professionally governed by the political administration's goal of Western settlement and the eradication of Indian culture.